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SUBJECT: 16 YEARS AFTER THE END OF COMMUNIST RULE, CZECHS
STILL DEBATING PROPRIETY OF COMMUNIST PARTY, BUT FEWER AND
FEWER OBJECT.

REF: PRAGUE 1575

11. (U) SUMMARY. A recent unsuccessful initiative to ban the Czech Communist Party (KSCM), together with November's anniversary of the student protests that led to the eventual end of communist rule, and the general elections scheduled for next June, have focused public debate on the role of the largely unreformed Communist Party. Some leading politicians and analysts, including several former dissidents, now argue that the world has changed significantly since 1989 and that the Communist Party, even if it has not changed significantly, now represents little or no threat to democracy. The increasing official tolerance of the Communist Party, and the openness with which parliamentary cooperation is acknowledged by the governing coalition's senior partner, the Social Democrats (CSSD), is changing the dynamics of national politics, resulting in a diminished role for the current opposition, and more, though still limited, space for the Prime Minister and his party. END SUMMARY

12. (U) Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek (CSSD) signed a petition drive to ban the Communists in the early 1990s. He now calls it "the stupidest thing I ever did," arguing that the effect was counterproductive and led to renewed unity within KSCM. Paroubek repeatedly makes the point that KSCM has 20% of the seats in parliament and that it is destabilizing to keep those votes outside the system. He argues that it would be better for the country to give those parliamentarians a chance to participate in normal political life.

3.(U) In a speech November 17, commemorating the 16th anniversary of the start of the Velvet Revolution, Paroubek dismissed concerns about a communist comeback, saying, "There is no USSR. There is no red Army. There is no Comintern. KSCM is no threat to democracy." Paroubek has recently relied on the Communists for support on several pieces of legislation affecting labor unions, student employees, and church-run charities. Statistics show the Communists supported the Social Democrats on 14 of 16 recent bills. The Prime Minister's coalition partners, the Christian Democrats, have, unsuccessfully, tried to oppose him on some of these measures. It is not clear whether Paroubek felt sufficiently emboldened by this successful cooperation with the Communists, or perhaps instead felt an obligation to do something in exchange, but in late November, Paroubek floated a trial balloon, announcing that if he were a parliamentarian, he would support the cancellation of the lustration law that prevents former top officials and secret police agents from the Communist era from holding high office. The move provoked such a strong reaction that Paroubek backed down two days later, saying he was putting aside his personal views for the moment, in order to not

destabilize the ruling coalition. While some observers believe that Paroubek may have finally found a limit to how far he can go in working with KSCM; others interpret this as more of a tactical retreat.

4.(U) Paroubek is not alone in arguing that it is time to bring the Communist Party and its supporters out of the political wilderness. A number of important and influential political figures no longer support the ostracizing of the Communist Party. Former President Vaclav Havel has been blamed by some for not banning the Communists when he was president in the early 90's. Havel argued last month that there was little call for such a move in the early 90's. Havel instead feels that the opportunists within the old communist structures left the party in the early 90's, got fabulously wealthy, and are today exerting a far more dangerous and corrosive influence on Czech democracy than the ideological diehards who stayed behind. Havel says it was the malfeasance of other parties, a shot at President Klaus's Civic Democrats (ODS), that made it possible for the KSCM to stay alive.

5.(U) Senate President Petr Pithart (KDU-CSL, Christian Democrats), who is the son of a Communist-era Ambassador to France and former Communist himself, argues that the Communists should be allowed to participate in political life. "It is much better to beat them at the polls," he argues, though it is very unlikely his own party will come out ahead of KSCM.

¶6. (SBU) Political analyst Jiri Pehe, who also advises Paroubek, argues that what made the communists so evil wasn't their desire to have free universal health care, free tuition, regulated rents, and strong labor unions. Instead, in Pehe's view, it was the communist control over the media,

the judiciary and the educational curricula, limited freedom of movement, and so on. Pehe argues that the pre-1989 Communist party was able to do all this because they were backed up by Moscow. Pehe points out that the situation is dramatically different today. The Czech media is today in the hands of Swiss and German press barons who exert commercial rather than political pressure. Regarding the liberty to travel, Pehe points out that most Czechs feel the greatest impediment is U.S. visa law. In a November 30 editorial in the national daily Mlada Fronta, Pehe writes, "Communism has ended and it will never return. The sooner all those who fight against it realize this, the sooner standard democracy will prevail in the Czech Republic."

¶6. (U) Finance Minister and CSSD Chair Bohuslav Sobotka, considered the standard bearer for the moderate faction within the party, mentioned cooperation with the Communists this month, saying he would rely on their support, if necessary, to pass dozens of key bills before the election next June. Just this spring, during the political uncertainty surrounding then Prime Minister Gross, Sobotka had said that he would resign if Gross were to set up a minority government supported by the Communists.

¶7. (U) President Klaus, who has said he would not attend a KSCM party congress because of the party's past, nevertheless disagrees with any attempt to ban communism now. Klaus reasons that communism was defeated in November of 1989. He says communism as a political movement doesn't exist anymore.

¶8. (SBU) Vladimir Mlynar, former dissident, former journalist for the liberal weekly RESPEKT, former minister without portfolio and Minister of Informatics and member of the liberal party, the Freedom Union, is generally regarded as a life-long anti-Communist. Mlynar told the Embassy in November that he doesn't regard the Communist party as a threat and feels that, although he dislikes the party, it is a part of the political spectrum today and should be treated as such.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: The American polling firm, PSB, hired by CSSD for the 2006 election campaign, released the results of

a survey November 30 showing that 55% of Czechs feel that KSCM should be treated like any other standard political party. Two thirds of those responding said the Communist Party should not be banned. Ironically, some of the most vocal opposition to the Communists is coming from young activists who would have only experienced communism in their infancy. On the other hand, some of the traditionally pro-U.S. voices in the country are saying that it no longer makes sense to outlaw, or even ostracize, the Communists. This is reducing the leverage of the opposition Civic Democrats, as well as CSSD's junior coalition partners, since the opposition Communists have already said they will support several key government bills. It is also undercutting one of the main election themes of the Civic Democrats, namely that support for CSSD will lead to a reemergence of the Communists. Current opinion polls give left-of-center CSSD and KSCM combined a slight lead over right-of-center ODS and KDU-CSL. It's still too early to say for certain that this lead will be borne out in the voting next June. But whatever the outcome of the 2006 vote, it seems only a matter of time before the Communist party is treated like all other political parties in the Czech Republic - mistrusted and disdained. And that could be the toughest test KSCM has faced since 1989. END COMMENT

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